

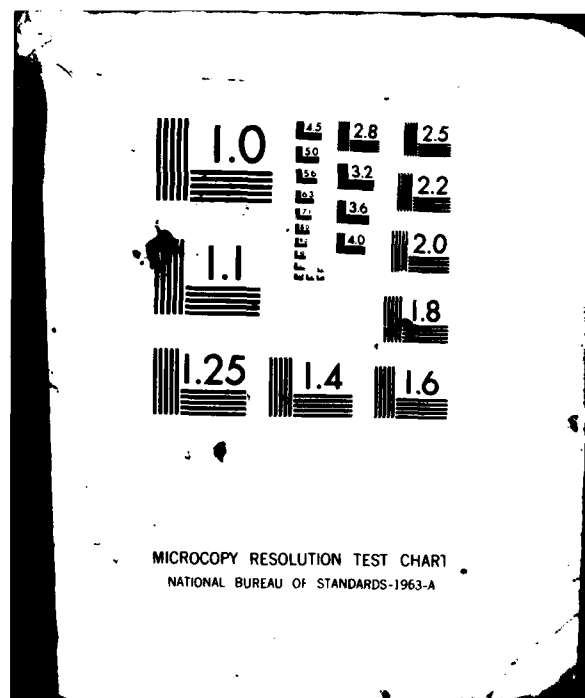
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MX OR BUTTER?



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MX OR BUTTER?

by

Edward A. Corcoran

15 June 1982

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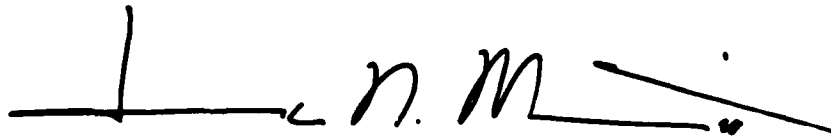
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FOREWORD

Facing the enormous projected costs of strategic systems such as MX, this memorandum addresses the need for a basic assessment of US strategic objectives, particularly long-term US goals in regard to the Soviet Union. While military expenditures can provide the United States short-term security, long-term security is grounded on social development. Consequently, a central US strategic objective must be promoting a Soviet reorientation to internal development. Policies seeking such an evolution must integrate political, military, economic, social, and psychological instruments into a comprehensive and internally consistent strategy. Only against the background of such a comprehensive strategy can the utility of such major programs as MX be assessed.

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This memorandum was prepared as a contribution to the field of national security research and study. As such, it does not reflect the official view of the College, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. N. M.', is written over a horizontal line.

JACK N. MERRITT
Major General, USA
Commandant

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

LIEUTENANT COLONEL EDWARD A. CORCORAN joined the Strategic Studies Institute in 1978 after a tour as materiel officer at an ammunition depot in Korea. An ordnance officer with a background in missiles and special weapons, he holds a doctorate in political science from Columbia University and is a member of the Foreign Area Officers Program specializing in the Soviet Union. Past assignments have included service in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for intelligence in Headquarters, US Army Europe, and as a liaison officer to the Soviet Commander-in-Chief in East Germany.

SUMMARY

Projected expenses for the MX missile system would make it a rival of the Great Wall of China as one of the largest societal projects ever undertaken. Before embarking on such a massive project, it is only prudent to reexamine the basic strategic objectives which it seeks to support.

Despite the major impact that MX development would have on the United States, strategic assessments of its utility have been distressingly shallow. Typically, they turn directly to discussions of military strategy, specifically nuclear strategy. But even accepting that MX can contribute to US national security, its impact on US long-term goals is largely unexamined.

In fact, a major strategic shortcoming of US strategy is the lack of a clearly defined long-term goal in regard to the Soviet Union. What sort of Soviet Union would the United States like to see and how could it promote evolution in that direction?

Military instruments can provide for security in the short term, but in the long term, security depends on the responsiveness of governments to the social, economic, and psychological demands of their citizens. In regard to the Soviet Union, the United States must promote a reorientation toward internal development, accompanied by a decrease in the offensive aspects of the Warsaw Pact military posture. Once such goals are clearly outlined, the United States can develop a competitive engagement strategy, as proposed by one specialist, to integrate the political, military, economic, social, and psychological instruments of policy. Only against the outlines of such a strategy can the utility of major systems, such as MX, be adequately assessed.

MX OR BUTTER?

The Great Wall stretches for two thousand miles across northern China, the only man-made structure visible from the moon and the greatest societal project ever undertaken. Now a rival is being proposed, a new defense project of comparable scope which one day may awe our distant heirs with the vastness of its conception—the MX missile system—which would include thousands of miles of roads spread across the open spaces of our western deserts. Perhaps in the far off future MX will be a monument, like the Great Wall, to foresight and determination, a defense project which sustained national defense for decades. Or perhaps, like North Dakota's Nekoma antiballistic missile (ABM) complex, it will become a monument to waste and shortsightedness. Built at a cost of over \$5 billion, the ABM system was termed by President Nixon himself as "the most important element in our nation's security." The Nekoma complex went fully operational on schedule—October 1, 1975—the day before the House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved a budget calling for its deactivation.¹

With projected costs of \$30-\$230 billion, the MX would dwarf the ABM both in its scope and in its effect on the country.² Already it has stirred much opposition because of the resources it will draw from other programs and because of the anticipated social and environmental effects in its proposed basing areas.³ The decision to deploy a scaled-down interim MX system, together with B-1

bomber development, has neither satisfied critics nor avoided massive expenditures.⁴ Rather, it has widened the debate on fundamental questions of nuclear strategy—could US military defense be equally well served by a sea-based MX, or an increase in Trident nuclear submarines, or even by a revival of ABM systems?⁵ There is also distress at the prospects of less butter for the American people—and less health care, educational assistance, solar development, and pollution control. MX advocates stress that the first duty of a nation is to provide a secure shield of national defense behind which its society can develop. At the extremes, the question becomes a test of national purpose: MX or butter? Will the American people arouse their collective resolve and choose the road of national strength? Or will they squander their resources on free lunches and flashy cars?

Unfortunately, reality cannot be reduced to such a simple choice. Strategic assessments of MX have been distressingly shallow, despite a recognized need to address its wider strategic implications. Even broad appraisals of US strategy invariably turn directly to discussions of military strategy, or even specifically, nuclear strategy.⁶ Where are the discussions of MX in terms of its implications for long-term US goals?

While national survival is clearly a first priority goal, will MX significantly contribute to this, or will it be, in the view of one critic, simply another marginal effort to perfect our strategic forces “against every possible contingency?”⁷ Because of open questions on the accuracy and reliability of strategic nuclear systems and their potential to become technologically obsolete even before they are completed, it is unclear that MX is desirable even in the narrow context of the strategic nuclear balance.⁸ A disturbingly large percentage of the total US defense budget would be going into this one system. On the broader military dimension, MX competes not only against butter, but also against guns, and will force the United States to reduce a broad range of other military options. Even if MX can contribute significantly to US national survival, will it do so by undermining long-term goals? Could other approaches work as well?

Before any of these questions can be directly addressed, there must be the assessment of broad strategic questions so often called for and just as frequently ignored. One European commentator recently put his finger on the most conspicuous of these strategic

gaps—the United States must define what it wants from the Soviet Union.’ Without clearly defined political goals, it is impossible to orchestrate the range of US policy options in an integrated strategy, much less evaluate the adequacy or even rationality of specific military programs. One result of this void has been the manifest tendency to concentrate on the one clearly identified goal—national survival—and assess programs in terms of their short-term effect, producing what George Kennan has aptly called the “militarization of thought.”¹⁰ The natural consequence is the search for military ways to constrain growing Soviet military power until Until what? That is the unanswered, and usually unasked, question. For the United States to fill its leadership role, it must indicate where it wants to go.

The question of goals leads directly to the jumbled goulash of Soviet culture, with its hearty stock of Russian history and undissolved lumps of dozens of other cultures, liberally flavored with Marxism-Leninism, steeped in morbid suspicions, and threatening to overflow its pot. What elements of this extraordinary stew are poisonous, or at least indigestible? And what elements are perhaps simply not to American taste? What change does the United States want in the recipe?

The 1974 Helsinki Final Act made some attempt at identifying the noxious ingredients—suppression of human rights, restraints on cultural exchanges, a lack of concern for individual feelings and aspirations. In return for Soviet acceptance of nicely worded phrases in Basket III, the West made notable political and economic concessions in Baskets I and II, granting a *de facto* if not a *de jure* recognition of existing European boundaries and supporting broad increases in East-West trade. The results have been generally disappointing for the United States.¹¹ The Soviets have hastened the pace and scope of their military expansion, while increasing internal repression behind a screen of “noninterference in internal affairs.”

Clearly, a more careful outline of Western goals is necessary and, following that, a more careful coordination of policy instruments based on the recognition that fundamental Western advantages are not military, but rather economic and psychological. How can such instruments best be integrated with military policies in a comprehensive strategy focusing on defined goals?

The most fundamental long-term goal vis-a-vis the Soviet Union would probably be a reorientation of Soviet priorities towards internal development.¹² This would include a decrease in military expenditures and specifically a deemphasis on the offensive capabilities of their armed forces. It would also entail greater opportunities for East Europe to develop economically and socially in a continuing close but nonoppressive relationship with the USSR.

An inward focusing Soviet Union would not serve as an instrument of global disruption, instigating terrorism, violent revolution, or supporting military intervention by itself or its allies.¹³ It might even be persuaded to cooperate in developing practical solutions to global environmental, energy, and population problems.

Finally, a "mellowed" Soviet Union would have to show some tolerance of open debate, as a promoter rather than a destroyer of internal stability. In this vein, concern for human rights and individual aspirations is not simply a moralistic demand of unrealistic preachers. It is rather an essential foundation for building up the mutual trust and respect which must underlie any broader cooperation with the West.

Adoption of such policies would clearly imply some fundamental changes within the Soviet Union. The most basic changes would be a willingness to allow open examination of Marxism-Leninism as a body of hypotheses and propositions to be accepted or rejected as evidence and experience dictates. Such a development could expressly threaten the present leadership whose privileged position is directly based on the asserted infallibility of the party and who are vulnerable to charges of complicity in Stalinist excesses. But the Soviet leadership emerging in the next decades is not nearly so vulnerable to such charges of complicity. It has the potential to develop a legitimacy based on competence in directing the economic and social development of the Soviet state.

Such considerations rarely appear in US strategic discussions. When basic changes in the Soviet system are discussed, it is usually with a feeling that they are whimsical, visionary, even naive—they go against the grain of Russian history or seem totally incompatible with Soviet cultural and political concepts. In short, they appear completely unrealizable. Certainly they are unrealizable in the short run. But if there is little in Russian history which suggests possible

evolution in this direction, this is not so for many other Soviet nationalities and certainly not for the broader tapestry of Western history. Individual initiative, human rights, and open societies were also incompatible with early European feudal systems; social pressures from economic development led to these concepts. While contemporary Soviet economic development will not necessarily lead to similar social developments, evolution in this direction would certainly be compatible with European historical experience. In other words, this is an attainable if not inevitable development, given a patient external pressure over the course of decades or even generations. The fashioning of a comprehensive set of goals is necessary if the United States hopes to construct a coherent long-range strategy integrating political, economic, social, and psychological elements. Only then can the military elements of the strategy be assessed in terms of their ultimate effect.

Detente was an attempt to move away from the military emphasis, but it was flawed by US illusions that reductions in tension would somehow dissolve centuries of ingrained differences. The Soviets had no such illusions. They quite bluntly stated that for them peaceful coexistence did not mean cessation of competition in Third World or nonmilitary areas.

Detente clearly demonstrated once again the poor US capability to positively integrate various policy options. How can wheat and technology be rationally integrated into a coherent strategic policy when the farmers and manufacturers who bear the brunt of trade sanctions quite understandably, and effectively, lobby for relaxation of controls? The Soviets well understand the interdependence of strategic elements and their own policies are well coordinated. Nevertheless, they are quite prepared to lament US strategic linkages when it suits their purpose to induce more disjointed Western approaches. For the United States, it is a real challenge to develop procedures for spreading the social costs of strategic decisions and thus to allow better integration of domestic and foreign policies.

Detente has also demonstrated once again the impatience of US policy and how skeptical it is of unquantifiable changes, although these were the very types of changes which detente sought to achieve. Former Ambassador to Poland R. T. Davies addressed this point succinctly:

During his recent visit to Europe, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger said that detente 'only reinforced the Soviet prison wall which stretches from the Balkans to the Baltic.' That is wrong. Detente made possible the Polish revolution. It did not *cause* that revolution, which had quite different roots. But only during a period of relaxation of tensions, such as we have had since the Moscow summit of 1972, could the Polish events take place.¹⁴

But patience has its limits. The relaxation of tensions almost immediately reduced NATO's sense of threat from the Warsaw Pact and began to undermine Western defense expenditures. Detente also reduced the East European sense of threat in regards to NATO, and especially West Germany, and generated a reluctance to continue high levels of military expenditures, particularly in Hungary and Poland. But such effects have been minimal in the Soviet Union. The Soviets instead have taken advantage of developing trade and Western credits to afford both guns and butter, feeding urgent consumer demands while financing an impressive buildup of military forces. Clearly any development of internal pressures for reductions in Soviet military expenditures will, at best, lag considerably behind those in the West. This lag clearly indicates that US strategy cannot depend on Soviet good will or trust, particularly in view of the Soviet penchant for deception and willingness to use periods of relaxation to build military power. Nor can US strategy neglect short-term considerations—there will be no long term to worry about if the short term brings disaster. Military forces are therefore essential for national defense, and their costs must be borne if the society is to survive. Like individual armor, however, a nation's military shield can become too sturdy for its own good. Its weight can wear the defender down and its costs can sap his strength, weaken his resolve, and undermine his long-term security. Increasing US defense expenditures correlate with decreasing economic growth,¹⁵ and hence an eventual retardation of the very industrial growth essential for a strong defense posture. On a more basic level, defense expenditures can decrease the social programs which produce a cohesive US society.¹⁶ At the extreme, a United States wracked by racial riots, widespread crime and drug abuse, massive unemployment, and a loss of faith in social institutions would be unable to fashion a staunch defense, regardless of military expenditures.

Reductions in living standards would also reduce the appeal of the US economic model to other countries. The more social

problems which exist, the more substantiation there is for Marxist anti-American propaganda, the greater the hesitancy of foreign governments to side with the United States, and the lower the probability of favorable social evolution in East Europe and the Soviet Union. Many of our allies, even now, are clearly skeptical of the US emphasis on military approaches. Resources spent to improve living standards in Puerto Rico or relations with Mexico would probably do much more in the long run to increase US security than comparable amounts spent on military forces.

While the military provides significant social benefits by furnishing disadvantaged young citizens education and socializing them more into the mainstream of American life, many military skills are not transferable to civilian occupations. The family trauma inevitably associated with the military—separations, constant moves, and untimely deaths from what is often a hazardous occupation—can help weaken the social cohesion a strong nation must have. These disruptive social effects of military service must also be considered when assessing the effect of increased military expenditures.

In the final analysis, a strong defense begins at home. Butter greases the mechanism of a smoothly functioning social organization. Social expenditures are intrinsically useful. They support long-term security by building consensus on social issues and attracting support from allied and friendly nations. At the same time, the military must be strong enough to defend the United States. Behind its shield, the United States can bring its economic and psychological advantages to bear in coercing, cajoling, and inducing the sort of Soviet evolution sought by the national strategy. While military expenditures are necessary for short-term security, they are like insurance—they are not intrinsically useful, but it is difficult to judge when enough is available. Yet clearly one can not afford to insure against every possible calamity.

NATO Europe well illustrates the dilemmas of Western defense. Warsaw Pact military buildups require a Western response. But increasing NATO ground forces, modernizing combat aircraft, and upgrading theater nuclear capabilities threaten to fuel an arms race. By lending support to Warsaw Pact propaganda on the "NATO threat," Western military improvements also undermine pressures within the Pact countries for military reductions. Yet a staunch NATO defense is still necessary for survival. In fact, problems in

mobilization, reinforcement, combat force balance, and rear area security make even an improved NATO defense uncomfortably susceptible to quick destruction. If war comes, a NATO resort to nuclear weapons, if not first used by the Warsaw Pact, seems unlikely to redress the situation. It is hard to imagine a "successful" nuclear war from the point of view of NATO Europe. The challenge for NATO is how to develop an effective defense that also supports long-term security. One approach could be to place greater emphasis on defensive military elements, such as antiarmor weapons, air defense systems, reserve territorial forces, fortified positions in depth, and area denial systems. A complementary political approach to an evolving West European defense would have to include broader ties with East European countries, building their self-reliance and confidence to the point where the Soviets cannot push them into an offensive war against the West. While the Soviets have shown a clear aversion to such evolution, the 1981 Polish events demonstrate that concerted Western efforts can support such movement. If sustained over the long term, such Western efforts could encourage significant reductions in the offensive aspects of the Warsaw Pact military posture.

On a global scale, if the United States seeks a Soviet reorientation from military confrontation to economic and social competition, US military efforts can do little more than perform a holding action. Political pressures, economic inducements, and psychological initiatives must work to produce those long-term internal changes within the Soviet system which can support a durable and stable global cooperation addressing the broad problems of mankind. Only then can the United States concentrate its efforts on ultimate goals of social development.

This returns to the central point of this paper—questions of US goals, particularly vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, must first be faced before any comprehensive strategy can even be developed. A strategy not based on a clear definition of goals is like a plane without a pilot—it will never get anywhere because it doesn't know where it wants to go. Once goals have been set, criteria can be developed for assessments of long-term evolutionary processes—processes which will certainly require decades at the very least. Then a coherent strategy along the lines of the "competitive engagement" proposed by William Odom can be devised to

integrate the political, military, economic, social, and psychological instruments of US policy.¹⁷ With such a comprehensive strategy, the United States could provide the leadership necessary to develop a concerted effort by allied and friendly nations. Only then can European defense, MX development, and a host of lesser defense questions be intelligently addressed. While the competition between MX and butter is not unique in raising these issues, the magnitude of the MX proposal makes such a basic reassessment mandatory.

ENDNOTES

1. Sid Moody, "Decayed Missile Base a Monument to Waste," *Norfolk Virginian Pilot*, February 1, 1981, p. C2.
2. Cost estimates are particularly problematic. Air Force Under Secretary Antonia Chayes estimated 33.8 billion constant 1980 dollars (House, Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *The MX Missile System*, Hearings, Serial No. 96-30, p. 81), while the Council on Economic Priorities estimated up to \$232 billion, allowing for inflation (*The Washington Post*, July 31, 1981); see also *The New York Times*, February 28, 1981, p. 9.
3. See, for example: Bruce A. Smith, "MX Environmental Impact Report Draws Criticism," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, January 5, 1981, pp. 16-17.
4. *The Washington Post*, October 3 and November 11, 1981.
5. Typical articles are: Donald D. Holt, "A Defense Budget for the 1980s," *Fortune*, January 26, 1981, pp. 52-58, and Tom Buckley, "A Voice of Reason Among the Nuclear Warriors," *Quest*, March 1981, pp. 17-21, 80-85; Stephen Webbe, "MX Choices for Reagan Full of Flaws, Risks, Experts Say," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 29, 1981.
6. Even Andrew J. Goodpaster's thoughtful article on "Development of a Coherent American Strategy" (*Parameters*, March 1981, pp. 2-8) moves directly from mention of US values to an examination of military defense issues; many other articles are considerably narrower, even when claiming to be otherwise, such as Seymour L. Zeiberg's "M-X, The Full Perspective" (*Defense* 80, September 1980) which focuses strictly on strategic nuclear issues.
7. Buckley, p. 18. David T. Johnson ("Putting a Lid on the Military Budget," *USA Today*, November 1980, p. 10) makes the same point, noting an "obsession with extremely remote scenarios."
8. Kosta Tsipis, "The Accuracy of Strategic Missiles," *Scientific American*, July 1975, pp. 20-22; see also Michael Getler, "Fundamental Questions Overlooked in Debate on the MX Missile," *The Washington Post*, September 1, 1981, p. A7.
9. William Pfaff, "U.S. Must Define What It Wants From Soviet Union," *Chicago Tribune* (from *The International Herald Tribune*), April 5, 1981, p. 4.
10. *The New York Times*, February 1, 1980, p. 29.
11. US Congress, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Implementation of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe*, Report to the Congress, August 1, 1977.
12. As long ago as his famous "X" article, George Kennan advocated containment of the Soviet Union until an eventual undefined "mellowing" (cited in Norman Podhoretz, "The Future Danger," *Commentary*, April 1981, p. 44). At the other end of the US ideological spectrum, Richard Pipes is quoted as seeking to push the Soviet leaders into "peacefully changing their Communist system" (Ronald Steel, "The Soviet Union: Reagan's Blind Spot," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1981, p. 1-E).
13. Certainly such Soviet actions are conjectural, but there is ample analysis supporting internal problems as being a major, though hardly unique, factor motivating external activism. See, for example, Harrison E. Salisbury, "The Russia Reagan Faces," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 1, 1981, pp. 30-31, 50-57, and Richard New Lebow, "Soviet Incentives for Brinkmanship?," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 1981, p. 15.

14. R. T. Davies, "The Real Dangers of Detente," *The Washington Post*, April 26, 1981, p. 17.

15. This correlation is certainly disputed by some and complicated by short-term versus long-term considerations. See: "Can the Nation Afford It?," *Newsweek*, June 8, 1981, pp. 44, 46; Michelle Stone, "The Arms Buildup," *USA Today*, March 1981, pp. 23-24; David Salisbury, "On Collision Course: MX Missile and Energy Development in West," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 31, 1981; "How Defense Dollars Can Boomerang," *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 7, 1981, p. 10; and David Gold and Robert DeGrasse, Jr., "Economic Recovery Vs. Defense Spending," *The New York Times*, February 20, 1981, p. 27.

16. Current defense budget proposals will require massive reductions in social programs. For one comprehensive listing see: "83 Programs: A Profile," *The New York Times*, February 20, 1981, pp. A11-13.

17. William E. Odom, "Whither the Soviet Union?," *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 1981, pp. 46-47.

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